

Violence, boys, and the labor market

Serah Hyde

There has been much research dedicated to the importance of childhood environment on future success. For example, it has been found that by age 3, children of high-income households are exposed to 3 times as many words as children of low-income households. This, in turn, has proved predictive of distinct differences in vocabulary at age 10. While most would agree that vocabulary is important, there are likely more important determinants of future success in the labor market. One such determinant is personal security.

Safety is one of the most basic needs for children. Those who are raised in unsafe environments may suffer consequences that follow them well into the future. In 2014, Dionissi Aliprantis studied found a strong connection between exposure to violence in childhood and risky behaviors (e.g., dealing drugs, joining gangs, getting suspended from school, fighting, and carrying firearms) in adolescence and young adulthood.

In “[The consequences of exposure to violence during early childhood](#),” (*Economic Commentary*, Number 2016–03, May 2016) economists Dionissi Aliprantis and Anne Chen expand on earlier research by comparing how childhood exposure to violence affects the future outcomes of Black and White youth. They narrow their research to males because Aliprantis’s 2014 study revealed that males are more likely to be exposed to violence than females. The salient findings of their research include the following:

- Black males are exposed to more violence than their White counterparts.
- The differences in effects of childhood exposure to violence and subsequent risky behavior among the two racial groups is slight when holding constant the variables of educational attainment of parents, income, and household structure.
- Childhood exposure to violence leads to a shortened life expectancy for Black males and a host of undesirable outcomes for Black and White males alike.

To assess exposure to violence the authors use the data from the Centers for Disease Control and the National Center for Health Statistics (CDC/NCHS), a census of national death certificates, and the Bureau of Labor Statistics National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1997 (NLSY97), a nationally representative sample of individuals who were born between 1980 and 1984 and were living in the United States in 1997. The CDC/NCHS data reveal significant differences in the causes of mortality by race. White males are most likely to die from motor vehicle collisions, followed by suicide and homicide. In contrast, the prevalent cause of death among black males is homicide. At age 20, the death rate per 100,000 Black males by homicide is 48, compared with a death rate of 6 for white males. This, the authors conclude, is evidence that young Black males are exposed to violence at higher levels than their White counterparts. In the NLSY97 survey, respondents were asked if they had witnessed a shooting before age 12. Again a significant pattern of racial disparity in exposure to violence surfaces. Only 8 percent of Whites report witnessing someone being shot at before age 12, while 26 percent of black males report witnessing this event.

The authors cite two approaches for addressing the effects of childhood exposure to violence. The first approach is directed at enhancing early childhood education and the physical environment. Two noteworthy organizations were born from this need; the Community-Oriented Policing Services (COPS) and the Promise Neighborhood Initiative. The goal of COPS is to create a secure environment. The role of the Promise Neighborhood Initiative is to facilitate skill acquisition that will lead to future robust participation in the labor market. The second approach attempts to mitigate situations in which exposure to violence has already occurred. The goal of this method is to concentrate on the potential effects from multiple angles, e.g., provision of books and the Internet, psychological motivational techniques, and the implementation of “trauma-informed practices” by schools and social service providers.

Recognizing the importance of personal safety in early childhood for boys is essential. Early intervention would likely benefit society and the labor market by reducing the negative consequences attributable to males stunted by violence. Without interventions, the destructive phenomena associated with early exposure to violence will continue to adversely affect a significant pool of the labor market.